

The Builder.

No. CXXVIII.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1846.



THE fall of three large unfinished houses on the evening of the 12th instant, in Alfred-place, Thurlow-square, Brompton, when a labourer, James Casey, was killed, coupled with some similar failures elsewhere, has considerably excited the public. Mr. Mills, the deputy-coroner for Middlesex, with a very intelligent jury, opened an inquest on the body at the Hoop and Toy, adjoining the spot, on Saturday evening, and continued it on Wednesday morning last with considerable patience and care. The daily papers have probably made the majority of our readers acquainted with the details of the accident: we shall therefore confine ourselves to those points in the unfortunate occurrence which our duty to the public forces us to consider; and we may say at starting, that the remarks we may have to make, are intended to apply to the system rather than to individuals, and that we are anxious, on this occasion, to avoid injuring or even hurting the feelings of any individual concerned in it. Mr. Holmes, the builder of the houses, is a very respectable man, and has executed some dozens of houses under our own eyes.

The houses were four stories high above the ground; they were built in between other houses previously erected; and when the disaster occurred, the bricklayers were preparing to top the chimneys. Fortunately all the men had left with the exception of three, or the sacrifice of life would have been frightful.

Mr. Holmes deposed at the inquest on Saturday, that he had employed Messrs. Eminson to find the lime and labour in erecting the houses, he (witness) finding the bricks. The erection was commenced about two months ago, at sixty-five shillings per rod by measurement, to be finished in a workmanlike manner to the satisfaction of witness. The works were visited by Mr. Donaldson, the district-surveyor, and by Mr. Blore, the ground landlord's surveyor—the latter almost daily. Witness objected to any materials he disapproved of, and deputed Mr. Chapple, his foreman, to do so in his (witness's) absence. Mr. Chapple had done so with respect to a hundred houses which witness had erected. Mr. Chapple had never complained to witness that the work of those houses had not been done properly. Never received any complaint from the district-surveyor on the subject. Gave the usual notices required by the Building Act to the district-surveyor, which was evident by his attending. The landlord's surveyor had expressed a wish that hoop-iron should be used to tie the walls, which was extensively done. Attributed the falling of the houses to the wet weather and the number of men who had been running up and down the ladder and scaffold for some days before, which, added to the wet weather, occasioned the toppling of the chimneys, which would bring down the whole of the building with it, as it was all tied together. Another fact was to be considered:—formerly persons building could put wood in party-walls, but since the new Building Act had come into operation, not an inch must be put in. In witness's opinion, as a builder, party-walls are not so sound now as they were before. Had heard many other builders say so. Buildings were more substantial with wood bond, and far more safe, for hoop-iron bond will bend. The reason for leaving out wood was to prevent the extension of fires, and therefore thought the benefit derived from the alteration was greater than the injury. The bricks used

were Cowley bricks, which were considered the best of bricks. The mortar was good, for he had seen worse on other buildings.

Mr. Donaldson being called, said that he had found no occasion to complain of the materials used or the mode of erection, except that they put bats, which are small bricks, at the foundation, when he wished them to put good bricks there. His duty was only to attend to the thickness of the wall. Mr. Holmes was building under an agreement with Mr. Alexander (the owner of the property), and Mr. Blore, his surveyor, was the person to object to any materials. Thought the lime used good. Could not prevent builders using bats. He had only to do with the quality of the bricks used, and not with the form or size.

Mr. Holmes observed that he had had several walls not raised very high fall, and so had other builders.

Mr. Donaldson further said, that a house might as well be run up in six weeks as in six months, and therefore he could not complain in this case of haste! The chimneys above the attic floor, for the 20 feet, were 1 foot 10 inches thick, and when that toppled over, it took the attic joists with it, which caused the front and back walls to double in, being in a green state. As to the prohibition of wood, he and about twenty other surveyors were applied to, by both members of the Lords and Commons, for their opinions on the subject, and it was decided that keeping wood out of party walls would effect a great saving from fire. If a building was examined after a fire, it would be seen that the wood was all burnt out, and only holes left in the walls. Thought an iron hoop-tie was as good as a wood one. No wood was now permitted in a party-wall. Thought more timber might be put in front walls. Wet weather had a great effect on buildings that were going on. He considered that the oscillation of the men running up and down the ladder and scaffold, was very likely to have caused the toppling of the chimneys when the scaffold was removed, which the deceased and Collins were engaged in doing at the time of the fall. Mortar when used ought to be let set; for when it is moved by the oscillation he had spoken of, it gets rotten.

Mr. Blore, in answer to questions put to him, said he saw the buildings on Tuesday last, when he complained that there was not sufficient bonding in the wall, and told the workmen that they must take five or six courses of bricks off. He was of opinion that it had not been done, as the wall had, before it fell, been carried up to a great height. Did not stay to see that it was done. Preferred bond timber, but iron tying does for it. Wood bond was liable to fire. Thought, when he was last there, that they were getting on too fast, but he had no power to stop them! In his opinion wood was the best bond and tie to a wall that could possibly be had.

At the resumed hearing on Wednesday, Michael Hockwell deposed that he was foreman over the bricklayers, and had been engaged on the row of houses for the last six months. The three houses in question had been in hand about six weeks. Had been told to do the work in a workmanlike manner. Had never complained that there were too many bats, and that they were bad. Had not complained of the mortar to any one. It worked very easy. Thought too many bats had not been used. Had he been building his own house, he should have used more. Had used worse mortar on Government building. Had he made the mortar, he should have used three barrels of sand to one of lime, which he considered would be sufficient for any thing. If one more barrel of sand was used to that, the mortar would be inferior. Inferior mortar was sometimes used for party-walls. Could not account for the fall of the houses. Had worked for Mr. Grissell. Had used worse mortar, and had used better, but then it was nearly all lime. Good mortar would stick to the bricks if it had stood long enough to set—say four months, but bad mortar would not. Could not say if it was the bricks, the mortar, or the iron tying that first gave way. The wall was held by iron hooping, which ran along throughout it. It was tied wherever they could do so. Did not think iron tying so safe as wood. Thought the want of wood bond had nothing to do with the falling of the houses.

Patrick Marra, a labourer, deposed that he made the mortar, but had no directions as to the making of it. Thought about four bushels of sand to one of lime was the quantity he used, and, as no complaint or fault was found with him about it, he went on so from first to last. Had made mortar at the Great Western Railway, and for Mr. Hoof, but had there done so under the direction of a foreman, who, when he did not like it, told witness to put in more lime.

Thomas Hanniland, a carpenter in the employ of Mr. Holmes, says he was engaged on the works: Could not say how the houses came to fall. Thought they had been run up too quickly in damp weather. They had been only five weeks in erecting, when they ought to have been two months. Had not complained about the quickness, as that was not witness's place. When they were got up to about the first floor, the weather was very wet; and he thought that the lower part was not sufficiently set to bear the weight of the upper part. The walls were tied by irons which were torn out. Could lay the accident to nothing but the dampness of the walls. Considered the second floor gave way first. There was a great deficiency in the bond, as the law does not now allow timber to be used, and iron bond does not stand. That was the opinion of all working men. No wood is now used in party-walls, as a bond. All the wood that is now put in must be as a rest, and not longwise. Considered the chimneys could not have given way at the top, as the scaffold was a support to it. Should say the chimneys were run up about 40 feet above the top flooring. Considered the wall would not have buckled had bond timber been used in it.

Mr. Blore said, that if he was building for a gentleman, he should require in both cases that stock bricks should be used, and that the mortar should be made in the proportion of two and a half sand to one of lime, or of three to one. Thought four to one was not a fair proportion of ingredients. That was witness's opinion; but Dr. Higgins, an eminent writer on buildings, was of opinion the proportion might be seven to one. Had since tried the mortar, and found it substantial. Had complained to Mr. Holmes of bats being used, having found them being put even in the chimneys. The difference in the price of stock bricks from bats was 6s. per 1,000. The other houses were built more carefully than those in question, double the time having been taken, and the materials having been better. Had no authority, if he disapproved of the material and haste, to stop the work, but could withhold his certificate when they were finished. Had no doubt but that haste was very prejudicial. Mr. Donaldson, the district-surveyor, had the power to stop the building by giving the proper notice, when the matter would be referred to the referees, who have the power to order what is bad to be pulled down, or the builders to be indicted.

Mr. Bloomfield, the deputy district-surveyor, begged to inform the jury that the district-surveyor had, under the 14th section of the New Building Act, the power of stopping buildings, only when irregular as to the dimensions.

Mr. Blore said he attributed the cause of the accident to the reckless system of running up a heavy weight of materials to the height of twenty feet or more, without any support, and to a number of men running up a scaffold with a wall in such a state. He also thought the materials were not of the best description.

After consulting an hour and a half, the jury returned the following verdict:—

"That the deceased, James Casey, was killed by the sudden falling of certain houses in Alfred-place West, and that the houses so fell because they were not securely built; and in returning this verdict, the jury express their consideration (founded on the evidence and opinions laid before them) that the said houses were built more rapidly than they ought to have been built, considering the dampness of the weather, the height of the houses, and the directions of the Act of Parliament, which compelled the builders to construct the party-walls without bond timber. At the same time, the jury hope that next year the erection of party-walls with, and without, bond timber will be made the subject of legislative investigation,